DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 141 713 CG 011 540

AUTHOR Clark, W. Donald
TITLE Problem Clarification Consultation as a Response to Referral for Testing: A Means of Initiating Consultation Relationships.
PUB DATE 26 Mar 76
NOTE 5p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (Dallas, Texas, March 1976)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Consultation Programs; Educational Diagnosis; Elementary Secondary Education; Guides; *Psychological Tests; *Referral; *School Psychologists; *Staff Role; *Testing

ABSTRACT

Problem clarification is described as a process to be engaged in as a means of initiating consultation with school staff who refer children to the psychologist for testing. This process requires that the staff member and psychologist examine the stated reason for referring the child as well as reasons which may not have been included initially. Three questions which should be answered are: 1. What is known about the basic needs of the child? 2. What processes or experiences are required to meet these needs? 3. What procedural steps must be taken and by whom to obtain these processes or experiences? The goal of the consultation is to establish a plan for proceeding and to relate testing to informational needs which may or may not emerge or for which testing may or may not be appropriate. It is presumed that engaging in this process will offer opportunity for the consulting relationship to be further developed and for the traditional referral for testing model of service delivery to be modified drastically. (Author)

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PROBLEM CLARIFICATION CONSULTATION AS A RESPONSE TO REFERRAL FOR TESTING: A MEANS OF INITIATING CONSULTATION RELATIONSHIPS*

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W. Donald Clark
Graduate School of Applied and Professional Psychology
Rutgers University

In individual diagnostic consultation, testing of a child often proceeds without there first being a thorough clarification of the problem for which the child was referred for service. Means-ends chains are often a source of confusion in referral problem statements. It is common for a person making a referral to state a possible means toward the solution of some unstated problem as the problem itself. Thus, children are "referred for I.Q. testing" or "for projectives." In such instances, the problems of obtaining an I.Q. and personality diagnosis are stated as goals valuable in themselves. In actual fact, I.Q. and projective assessment may or may not be valuable as means toward developing solutions for the more basic but unstated problems for which the child was referred.

Often, the psychologist thinks that I.Q. or projective tests are not appropriate for a given child. If it is decided not to test the child, the teacher or other staff person who referred him may view the psychologist as uncooperative or shirking of duties. The psychologist may resent the implication that others are trying to dictate his job.

In addition to "reason for referral" questions, many referral forms also ask the person referring to state what problems the child has, what needs the child has, and what has been done to help the child with his problems and to meet his needs. However, because of common confusion about the nature and interrelationships of needs to each other, answers to such questions may be of little value: "He is referred because he is hyperactive. His problem is he is up out of his seat too much and so he doesn't learn. I have tried everything but sitting on him to keep him quiet and in his seat. I'm asking that he be tested to see if he is so overactive because he is brain damaged." In this example, it is probable that there are many specific behaviors which concern the teacher but are not stated, many problems resulting which are not explained by the child's being described as overactive alone, many factors including assumptions about the child's needs which went into the decision to refer, and many solutions which might apply to surpressing the hyperactivity as well as to meeting the child's needs in other ways.

Problem Clarification in Response to Referral

Problem clarification through consultation offers the school psychologist a means of obtaining the information needed to determine whether individual assessment is needed or, if it is, the kind of assessment which is most likely to be helpful. It further provides a structure upon which consultation with a teacher can be initiated and developed in the interest of providing services not directly related to requests for testing. The use of a problem clarification approach must

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*Paper included in workshop given by the author. Annual meeting, National Association of School Psychologists, March 26, 1976, Kansas City, MO

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grow out of a conceptualization of the basic task of the school psychologist practitioner: to help clients with the prevention of problems. The remediation of problems or an advance toward desired goals through the competent and efficient application of the most effective methods and strategies which can be used, given the resources and constraints of the circumstances involved. Practice in pursuit of this task is conceived as problem solving (Comtois and Clark, 1975).

The first step in problem solving is problem clarification. If problems could be efficiently clarified through well-designed referral forms, counsultation for that purpose would be unnecessary. Consultation, however, offers the possibility for information and guidance from the psychologist to the teacher which can make for a more adequately clarified problem. Additionally, because thorough problem clarification requires the examination of needs, and processes and procedures designed to meet those needs, it may suggest solutions which do not include the testing for which a child was referred originally.

A model for consultation which can be applied to problem clarification as it will be described here is client centered case consultation as described by Caplan (1970). This model is one in which the psychologist views himself as a resource to another professional who retains the responsibility for his client. The child is seen at this point as the client of the teacher and the school psychologist is the teacher's consultant.

The Steps of Problem Clarification

A system for the purpose of clarifying the reason for referral is offered as a basis for consultation in problem clarification. This system consists of three basic steps in the analysis of the needs structure of the client. Details of the system are described elsewhere (Clark, 1976) and an outline including example applications is also available (Clark, 1975). For that reason, the system is described here only in a general way as it applies to development of the consultation relationship.

A system for a needs structure must begin with an operational definition of need: the discrepancy between the state of affairs that exists with respect to the client and the desired state of affairs (what the professional thinks it ought to be). Consultation on problem clarification would begin with the response to a problem as stated in the referral: the psychologist replies to the teacher or other staff member with a request for a consultation conference. At the conference, the problem which is the stated reason for referral is examined by both the teacher and the psychologist. This examination focuses on the three steps which identify and structure the needs of the child as seen by the professionals involved.

1. What is known about basic needs of the child which may relate to the problem?

2. What processes should the child be engaged in or what experiences should he have if his basic needs relating to the problem are to be met?

3. What procedural steps must be taken by the professionals who have the child as a client if he is to be engaged in these processes or have these experiences?

The first of these steps will enable the psychologist and teacher to utilize what already is known about the child to define some of his needs. To the extent that his needs seem unknown or unclear, means of assessing him further can be planned. These means may or may not include a traditional battery of assessment.

Observation, parent conferences, review of developmental history, questionnaires, and educational achievement testing may be more apparently needed.

The second step can be looked at from the view of processes or experiences the child is getting and how accurately they match with whatever needs have been identified. It is not uncommon for careful analysis to uncover circumstances (which are presumed to be meeting the child's needs) in which the actual processes or experiences he is having do not match what professional judgement suggests should be prescribed. The teacher and psychologist can look at such processes and discuss means of achieving the specific qualities of experiences that are required to meet the child's needs. Further consultation in the means identified can be offered by the psychologist.

The third step can be discussed by teacher and psychologist in terms of what both will plan to do. Specific responsibilities can be planned in their appropriate sequence for completion. The teacher and psychologist can, in effect, contract for their responsibilities in "following up." Subsequent consultation sessions may also be scheduled for the purpose of evaluating the usefulness of the procedures planned and for identifying alternate procedures.

Summary

The use of a system for clarifying problems presented in school referral has been suggested as a basis for client-centered school consultation. The steps of the system are described in detail in another article. They provide a basis for analysis of the particular problem referred so that diagnostic testing need not proceed in a routinized and mechanical way and offer the possibility of development of ongoing consultative relationships.

Reference Notes

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